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AUTHOR Aig, Dennis
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ABSTRACT

In order to locate and study the primary sources needed in film research, a combination of bibliographies, advice from experienced research workers, and scripts, pressbook files, and film-print collections must be used. This discussion provides suggestions for locating and using archival film materials and examines some of the standard references available: bibliographies, catalogs, and directories. The use of less-standard resources, such as trade magazines, and specific sourcebooks is also examined. In addition, guidelines are presented for writing letters of inquiry, for using private collections and community and university libraries, and for contacting and interviewing filmmakers and other researchers. (KS)

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Dennis Aig
Department of English
The Ohio State University
164 West 17th Avenue
Columbus, Ohio 43210

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Working in the Film Archives

By Dennis Aig

During my doctoral dissertation research on screenwriter Jules Furthman, I learned that there is no definitive method for locating and using archival film materials. The few general bibliographies available do not give detailed descriptions of the holding listed. The major archives themselves (the Library of Congress, George Eastman House, Museum of Modern Art, Wisconsin Center for Theatre Research, UCLA) vary greatly in the accuracy of catalogue descriptions, the restrictions on the use of films and printed work, screening conditions and formats, duplication regulations, projection fees, and service charges. In order to locate and study the primary sources needed, a researcher must depend on a combination of bibliographies, letters of inquiry, advice from experienced research workers, and diligent examinations of scripts, pressbook files, and film print collections.

Before contacting an archive, a researcher should acquire as much information as possible about the films included in the project. At the very least, the correct title (and alternate ones, if there is confusion because of changes, re-releases, or British distribution), the production studio, the release date, and the director should be known. Since there is no uniform cataloguing system among the archives, a collection's staff needs as much

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information as possible in order to find the requested manuscript, publicity, or film print material. There is no single source for production information, but several standard bibliographies and catalogues provide basic facts about films. The Library of Congress catalogues have undergone several title changes, but the most important listing for features is the Catalog of Entries, 1912-1939 along with the editions for 1940-1949 and 1950-1959. Later entries can be found in the National Union Catalogue: Film and Film and Other Material for Projection. Most of the information in these volumes has been checked against the prints of the films submitted to the Library as part of copyright claims applications. The entries usually include the title, copyright date (which is not necessarily the release date, the producer or production company, and the major production credits. Although several of these compilations are called "union catalogues," they do not include the names of the institutions owning the materials. The catalogues are periodically updated.

The American Film Institute Catalogues 1921-30 and 1961-70 (New York: Bowker, 1971 and 1976, respectively) include a detailed list of credits along with synopses of the films. Georges Sadoul's Dictionary of Films and Dictionary of Film Makers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972) are additional sources of production information. The British Film Catalogue 1895-1970 (London: David and Charles, 1973, currently out of print) is especially valuable because it provides facts about many films not included in American catalogues. The New York

Times Directory of the Film (New York: Arno Press, 1974) is a good source for checking a release date by referring to the date of the first Times review of the film. The International Motion Picture Almanac and the Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures and Television also provide production and release date information. Specialized source books such as The American Movie Reference Book: The Sound Era (Englewood-Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969) and Who Wrote the Movie and What Else Did He Write? (Los Angeles: Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and Writers Guild of America,West, 1970) can also be helpful, especially in determining production credits. Back issues of Variety, Daily Variety, Film Daily, Hollywood Reporter, and other trade publications should also be consulted. Filmographies accompanying book and periodical studies of films and filmmakers are an additional source for locating and verifying production information.

Once the production information is known, the tedious and often frustrating task of locating the needed material begins. There is no central bibliography or catalogue that lists the specific films and scripts owned by each archive. A union catalogue is currently in preparation at the American Film Institute, but until it is completed, researchers will have to use general bibliographies and guides to individual libraries. Lee Ash's Subject Collections: A Guide to Special Book Collections (New York: R. R. Bowker, 4th ed., 1974) , under the heading "Moving Pictures," contains a list of the major film archives along with a general description of their holdings. This source, which is compiled from questionnaires sent to archival staffs, must be used carefully be-

cause some of the entries are misleading or inaccurate. As Ash himself cautions in the preface, changes in collections or oversights on the part of the staff answering the questionnaires will affect the accuracy of a particular description. Despite these possible problems, the book is a valuable source because it lists the addresses of the collections, the names of the curators and library directors, and general descriptions of the holdings in each collection. For script research, William C. Young's Guide to Manuscripts and Special Collections in American Theatre Arts in the United States and Canada (Chicago: American Library Association, 1971) provides information about the major collections that contain copies of scripts.

One of the difficulties with both Ash's and Young's work is that they do not give precise information about the materials listed. There is no way of knowing, for example, what scripts are included in a group described as "400-500 of MGM's outstanding scripts from the silents up to the mid-1950s." Both Ash and Young do at times distinguish among temporary scripts, cutting continuities, or dialogue continuities taken from the screen, but this information is not always included, and usually there is no identification of the script forms. Although these limitations make further preliminary work necessary, both books are good starting points for finding material.

The Catalogue of the Film Collection in the New York Public Library (New York: New York Public Library, 1960) and the two-volume Motion Pictures: A Catalog of Books, Periodicals, Screenplays and Stills, Theater Arts Library, University of California, Los Angeles (Boston: G. K. Hall and Company, 1972) are two of the

guides to individual collections that are especially useful. Both of these sources give specific information about the holdings of their respective collections. The individual guides, like the general bibliographies, specialize in descriptions of manuscript, printed, or still materials rather than in listings of prints of films. There is no catalogue that will indicate where to find archival prints of a film.

Since the general bibliographies and catalogues do not offer detailed information and many collections do not have their own guides, a letter of inquiry must be written to the archives in order to find out what each one actually owns. The letter should include the basic production information, an outline of the proposed research work, and a description of the kinds of materials needed (scripts, pressbooks, stills, or prints). Because their facilities are limited, many of the archives seem concerned about distinguishing between film addicts and serious cinema students. The response to the initial letter will depend on how "scholarly" the researcher's intentions appear to be. An academic affiliation, a graduate thesis topic, a funded film project, or a proposed article or book seem to be several of the major criteria for gaining permission to use archival resources. An official letterhead should be used whenever possible.

The letter of inquiry is especially important if prints are to be screened. Not all of the archives have print collections. Those that do (for example, the Museum of Modern Art, Eastman House, Library of Congress, Wisconsin Center for Theatre Research, UCLA) usually require that a screening appointment be made at least one week in advance. Although only the Museum of Modern Art

has a projection fee and a service charge, there are a variety of regulations among the archives concerning tape recordings of soundtracks, the multiple screening of films, and the number of people permitted to view a film at the same time. None of the archives will lend films to researchers. Some prints can be rented but usually only for use in the classroom or as part of a film series.

The initial inquiry can also prevent confusion about the location of materials within a particular collection. At UCLA, for example, the film prints are not in the same archive as the scripts, books, and stills. Most descriptions of UCLA special collections mention only the script and still holdings in the Theater Arts Library and ignore the prints in the UCLA Film Archive. Confusing points such as this can be clarified by correspondence with the archives.

The letter and the response to it will also save the researcher time and money once he or she arrives at the archive. Most collections are only open for a limited number of hours a day. If an advance appointment is made, most archives will pull the needed material so that it will be waiting for the researcher. As a result, the time spent looking for catalogue numbers or filling out request forms can be saved. An additional advantage of contacting an archive well in advance of a visit is that a library or museum staff will usually refer a researcher to other collections that have relevant sources. The researcher will then be better prepared to plan a travel and research schedule.

Working conditions vary from archive to archive. Most collections have a very limited amount of space, so that very often several

researchers must share a library table or work area. Rules for the duplication of scripts and publicity materials also differ among the archives. A researcher should check with the archive staff about which sources may be copied.

Screening conditions are also very different from one archive to another. Most archives use a combination of 16mm and 35mm Steenbecks along with moviolas and projectors. Several of the collections have theaters or auditoriums in which 16mm and 35mm prints can be given full-screen showings. As a result of these variations, a screening situation may range from viewing a film on a Steenbeck in a room in which five other people are each looking at different films to a private showing in a two-hundred-seat theater. The archives usually have provisions for Cinemascope and other widescreen formats.

Obtaining the use of uncatalogued source material in the Hollywood studios is even more complex than gaining access to university or museum collections. A letter of inquiry should be sent to the legal or story department to find out the studio's policy on permitting researchers to use the files. Letters should not be sent to the studio research department because its function is to provide information for films currently in production or scheduled for the future. The letter will also enable a researcher to determine whether a studio has donated its files and manuscripts to an archive. Paramount, for example, has given much of its material to the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Although the studios do not have formal facilities for researchers, at least two of them, MGM and Twentieth Century-Fox, permit the examination of their

scripts and legal files. These sources often reveal facts about script changes, preproduction planning, contract terms, and uncredited contributions. Screenings can also be arranged, but these usually require the considerable expense of hiring a union projectionist.

Because a film is often available for broadcast on television but is not included in an archive, television stations are another important research source. The TV Feature Film Source Book, published annually by the Broadcast Information Bureau in New York, provides an alphabetical listing of the films available for television rental. The entry for each film includes the running time, production credits, editing information, and both the theatrical and television distributor. By using the addresses and telephone numbers listed in the "Sources" section, a researcher may contact a distributor to find out whether a film has been leased to a station in his or her area. Local stations often arrange private screenings of films they plan to broadcast. If this arrangement is not possible, they will usually inform the researcher about the dates and times of films that are scheduled to be shown. Information about a station's editing policy is also usually available.

One of the most important research sources is the statements and recollections of the production people who were involved in the making of a specific film or group of films. Unfortunately, in the the case of commercial feature films, attempts to establish contact with filmmakers are usually futile. There seems to be a distrust of researchers among professional filmmakers unless a magazine article or book is in preparation. The reasons for this

unwillingness to be consulted are probably related to the traditional division between the "doers" and the "teachers" (or "analyzers"). Whatever the cause is, only a small number of production people are willing to talk or correspond with researchers. In my Furthman work, I was fortunate enough to have had the cooperation and encouragement of screenwriter Leigh Brackett, but my attempts to contact the actors, directors and cameramen that worked with Furthman were unsuccessful. For the sake of completeness, requests for interviews or written responses must be made, but usually the results will be discouraging.

Researchers, film periodical editors, and critics are almost always enthusiastic about providing research information, especially if they have done work in an area of study included in the project. These researchers will often know about archival material that the collections themselves have overlooked or forgotten. In one instance, a critic told me about a source he had examined in his own work on Furthman. The initial response I had received from the archive did not mention this material. After I wrote a letter including the critic's information, the archive found the document and sent me a photocopy of it.

Along with helping make the major collections more accessible, the researchers, editors, and critics can suggest unusual but valuable sources of information such as funeral records, county clerks' files, and back issues of obscure trade publications. For example, Elias Savada, a Washington, D. C., critic and filmmaker, informed me of the birth and death statistics contained in the records of Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California. Forest Lawn eventually provided me with a great deal of biographical material

about Furthman that I had not been able to find elsewhere. Peter Broderick, another Washington film worker, referred me to several prominent critics and teachers who provided important information.

A researcher should not ignore the resources offered by private collections and community and university libraries. Many individuals throughout the country have private collections of scripts and film prints. Usually, articles or inquiries in film periodicals or references from friends of the collector will inform a researcher about how to obtain permission to use the materials in an individual's collection. Local public libraries are quickly becoming an additional source of research information. Many libraries are acquiring collections of 16mm and Super-8 prints and videotapes of films. University libraries often have material that has been stored away or inadvertently omitted from the main library catalogue. At The Ohio State University, for example, the official list of scripts was limited almost exclusively to those works published in book form. During a visit to the University's Rare Book Collection, I learned from one of the librarians that the University possessed thirty-two boxes of scripts, most of which had been obtained directly from the Hollywood studios. A large number of these scripts contained the marginal notations of the actors, directors, and technicians that had worked on the films. It seems that one of the former curators had been interested in film research and had purchased as many scripts as he could. A typewritten list of each box's contents was the only cataloguing of the material that had ever been done.

Alertness and persistence are often more important in film research than a detailed list of archival holdings or a carefully

structured method for examining sources. No archive or library should be ignored in the search for information. Contact with other researchers should be established whenever possible so that knowledge and experiences may be shared. Through a conscientious use of archives, studios, television stations, and other researchers' advice and references, a great deal of undiscovered or forgotten material can be made available for discussion and analysis.

Dennis Aig
Department of English
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

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